

Robert Bates on Social Capital

There can be no doubt but that norms, conventions, and the habits of society matter and that they effect the capacity of societies to develop. As keenly put by one of our USAID colleagues, it does make a difference for someone planning a telecommunications project to know whether a local society would hide or hinder someone who began to cut down and to steal the phone lines.

It is convenient to call such norms and practices social capital. It is perhaps more useful, however, to limit the usage of the term to focus on the capacity of communities to cooperate and to organize in support of common objectives. Where this capacity is great, there will, research shows, be more public goods, less opportunistic behavior, and a greater capacity to mobilize resources for communal objectives.

It can of course also be the case, however, that what is good for a national sub-community may not be good for a nation. Where tribes and ethnic groups are capable of mobilizing for development purposes, they may also be able to mobilize for conflict. It is also possible that the objective of the group may be venal or malicious: some groups are very good at conspiring to defraud the state and at organizing crime. One person's "social capital" may therefore be another person's social bad.

While measuredly supportive of the utility of this concept in explaining the capacity of communities to provide themselves with collective goods, I am less supportive when turning to the implications for politics. Civic society is an important element of democracy. But I tend to feel that the links from the political to the social are at least and probably more important than from the social to the political. As countries democratize, people may become less suspicious and more willing and able to form groups and engage in collective endeavors. One reason there may be less social capital in Russia is that people may be suspicious and distrustful of each other because of their experience of political repression. In discussions of the relationships between social capital and politics, I tend to want to put the politics on the right hand side!

